

BUDDHISM AND SUICIDE: VOLUNTARY DEATH AND ITS PHILOSOPHY¹

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Abstract

Japan, one of the leading industrial countries, has had one of the world's highest suicide rates for years. This paper in its present form is a shortened version for publication in Assumption University's journal "*Prajna Vihara*". Since the limitation of space to 20 pages prevented a more exhaustive treatment of each chapter, this abbreviated version partially summarises Chapter 3 of my master's dissertation, *Ambiguity of Karmic Fate and Voluntary Death: Suicide Cases in Theravada Buddhism and Japanese Society*.³ This concise version thus analyses the statistics of suicides followed by references to the unique methods employed and phenomena related to suicide in modern Japanese society. In addition, it examines particular acts of voluntary death in Japan with reference to their cultural, religious, and philosophical aspects. Japan has some unique tendencies in regard to the prevalence of suicide and an 'aesthetics' or philosophy of death. Hopefully the findings in this paper can contribute practical guidelines which can be applied to the social problems surrounding suicide while promoting the right attitudes towards life not only in Japan, but in the whole world.

INTRODUCTION

Although my master's thesis primarily resulted out of a consideration of a comprehensive corpus of Buddhist discussions and stories on suicide in the Pali Canon, it is also based on a survey of suicide in Japan from medieval to modern times. While many cite economic-related hardships, it is evident that there are some economically developing countries with low suicide rates, especially Theravada Buddhist countries such as Myanmar and Thailand, which have preserved a more original form of

Buddhism than Japan. My initial idea was to clarify not only the real factors preventing or triggering suicides, but also to consider the problems surrounding suicide in the teachings of both Theravada and Japanese Buddhism.

My initial motive for studying Buddhism and suicide derived from an encounter I had in July 2008 when I visited a friend in Tokyo before I left Japan. He half-laughingly told me something which shocked me: “I lose someone around me through suicide every three months, so my friends are concerned that I might be next”. Sadly, many of the Japanese around him, myself included, have had similar experiences of losing someone in this way. With a heavy heart, I then left for Myanmar to complete my second bachelor’s degree at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University.

The particular mortal code associated with suicide has been universally accepted in Japan, which has consequently acquired the undesired epithet of ‘suicide nation’. It is an ever-increasing concern in Japan where suicide figures are among the highest of industrialised countries. For at least the past decade, almost 30,000 people kill themselves annually, equivalent to nearly one every 15 minutes. Other than the traditional suicide methods such as jumping, diving, and going to ‘popular’ suicide spots, a range of new methods have been constantly evolving day by day which draw peoples’ attention, including suicide websites for group-suicide, smoking a coal briquette in a closed car, creating poisonous gas by mixing toilet-bowl cleaner with other solutions, and so forth.

The present discussion can be divided into three sections. The first examines worldwide suicide statistics provided by authoritative or governmental reports. The second illustrates the unique methods and the phenomena of suicide in Japan generally. The third section analyses the Japanese act of suicide from religious, aesthetic, and philosophical viewpoints relating to death. Such unique tendencies exhibited by the prevalence of suicide can be regarded as quite similar to the concept of death in Nietzsche’s ‘*amor fati*’ (love for destiny). My conclusion is then drawn from the analysis of the real causal factors of suicide in Japan. This issue does not merely arise out of the Japanese cultural or traditional background, rather, my findings reveal that these factors are deeply intertwined with societal problems. Therefore, it would seem that the government has the primary responsibility to take an initiative for their resolution.

The final part of my thesis is concerned with the harmonious relationship between societal support and the development of Buddhist un-

derstanding in daily life. Popular Japanese Buddhist groups such as Jodo Shinshu would probably collaborate with the government in order to improve peoples' awareness of 'overcoming' suffering by 'embracing' Amida Buddha. Such a reflection of their own weakness and belief in Buddhism can undoubtedly contribute to the development of endurance in times of hardship.

WORLDWIDE SUICIDE STATISTICS

1. The Worldwide suicide rate

Over the past six decades, the World Health Organization (WHO) has compiled a considerable worldwide database on mortality associated with suicide in collaboration with its member states. The estimate for the year 2020 presents an approximate total of 1.53 million people dying as a result of suicide whereby 10-20 times more people attempt suicide worldwide. This rate averages out to one death every 20 seconds and one attempt every 1-2 seconds.⁴

Figure 1 shows the worldwide suicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants based on the WHO report for the year 2013.⁵ The leading country is Lithuania, where the suicide rate is 34.1%. Most of the top 10 countries were formerly communist. It is generally said that long unstable transitions of social systems may greatly afflict citizens in those countries. Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, ranked second among the Group of Eight leading industrialised nations. The rate is two to three times higher than that of the United States and Great Britain. Since suicides in South Korea have outnumbered those in Japan recently, Japan has only now managed to avoid the stigma of having the highest suicide rate of all the developed countries.

2. Suicide by gender

The global predominance of suicide rates by gender is consistently seen in the predominance of males over females (see Figure 2).⁶ The X-axis indicates the male suicide rate and the Y-axis that of females. The ratio to the left of the equal line of the male-female rate shows that the rate of female suicides outnumbers the male, and on the right, it indicates that the male number is higher than the female. Seen in Figure 2,

Figure 1: Worldwide suicide rates (WHO 2013)

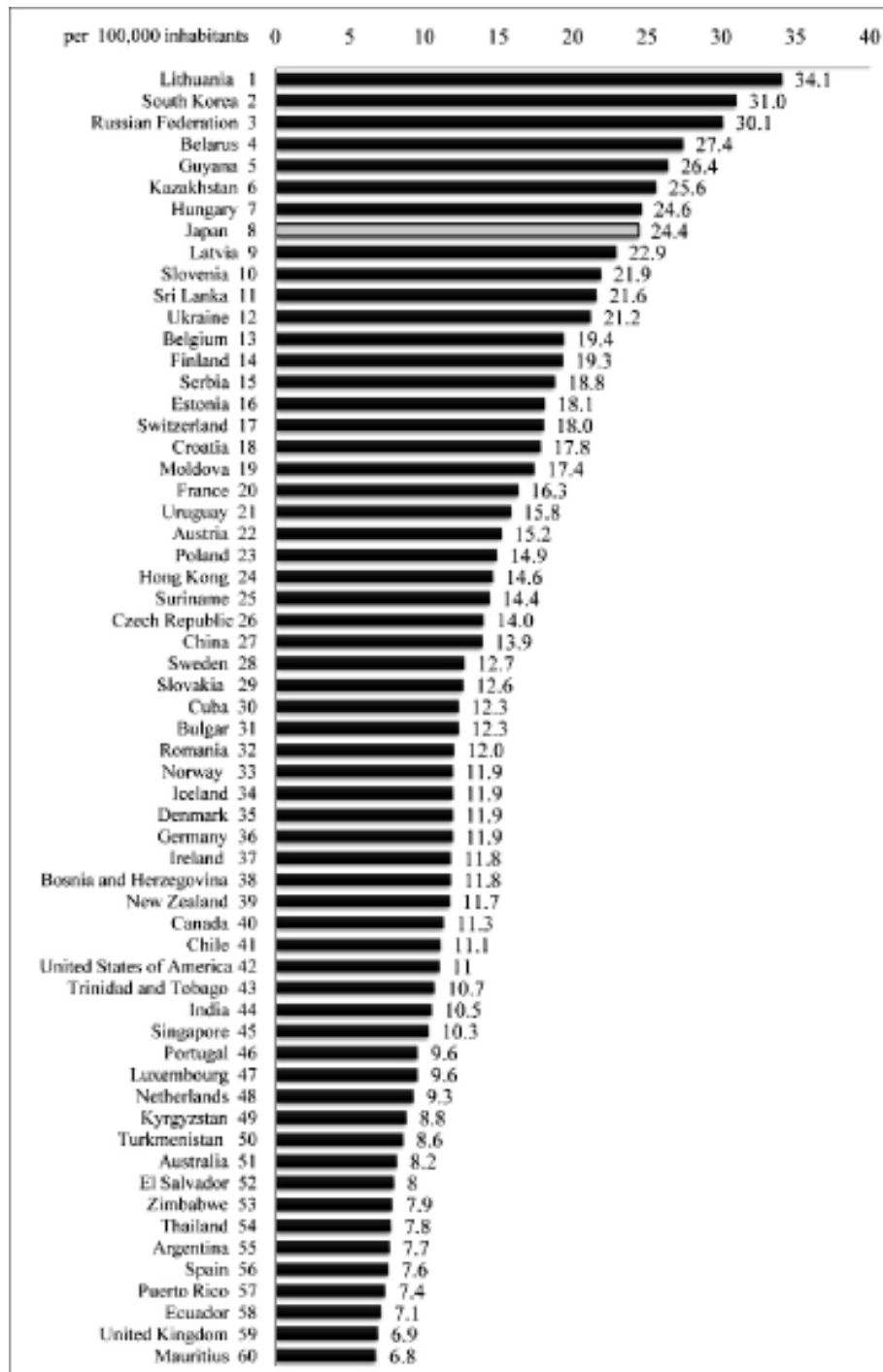


Figure 2: Male-female suicide rate ratio by country

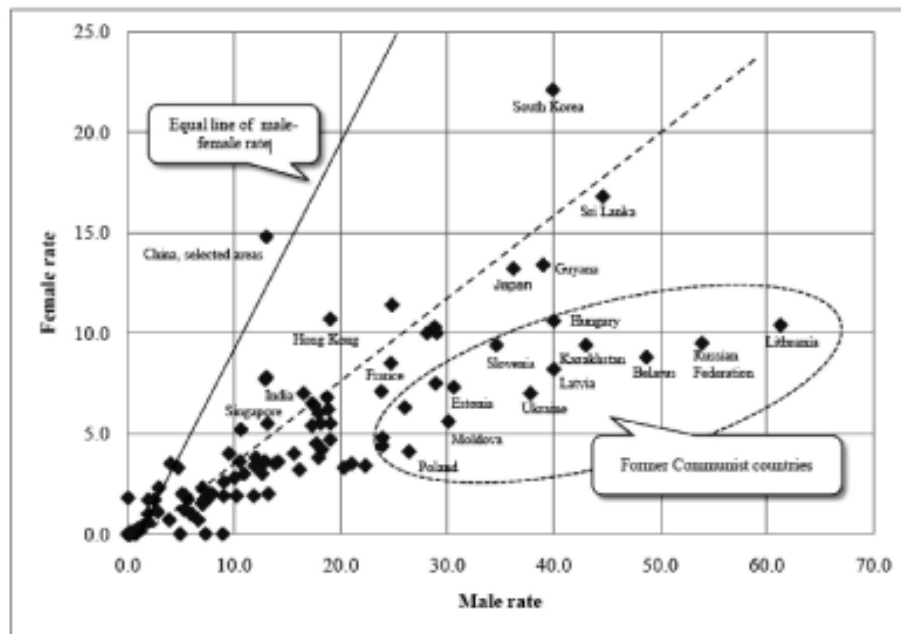
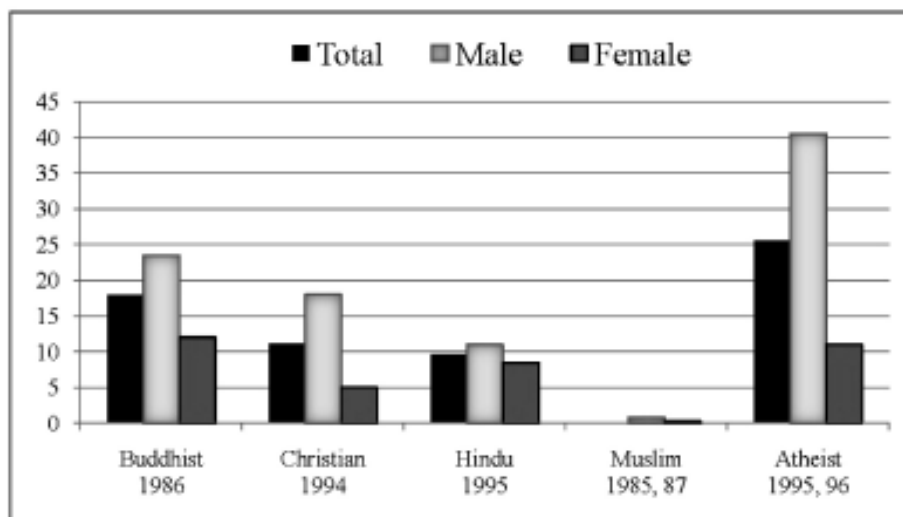


Figure 3: Suicide rates (per 100,000) by religion



Source: José Manoel Bertolote and Alexandra Fleishmann. A global perspective in the epidemiology of suicide. Suicidologi 2002: International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP)

male suicides are more frequent than female ones in most countries. The ratio is also fundamentally higher in former Soviet and communist countries, distinct from the group including Japan, South Korea, and Sri Lanka around the dotted line. The female rate in China is exceptionally high exceeding the male rate. A low male-female ratio is found in other Asian countries such as India, Hong Kong, and Singapore as well. Given the high female suicide rate in South Korea, it would most likely be influenced by the ethos of Confucianism still permeating society.

3. Suicide and religion

Figure 3 shows suicide rates in different world religions.⁷ In Muslim countries, remarkably, committing suicide is strictly prohibited. In contrast, the rate of suicide in Buddhist countries is distinctly higher than in countries where other religions or even atheism prevail. Emile Durkheim, the French founder of modern sociology well-known for his study *On Suicide*, examined this phenomenon in relation to both the individual and society: “Every society is predisposed to supply a given number of voluntary deaths”.⁸ According to his theory the collective order of society can be disturbed by sudden transformations such as massive impoverishment or excessive wealth aggravated by industrial, economic or financial crises.

Durkheim admits to the preventive benefits of religion as regards the suicide rate to a certain extent not because of its prohibition, but because of the strength of communal values. Moreover, the re-application of his theory to the correlation between Buddhism and the present society has yet to be examined, for the scope of his exploration is limited to Christianity and Judaism, which he had researched in a range of neighbouring European countries around France in the early twentieth century. In Christianity, the act of suicide is generally regarded with disapproval as a sacrilegious act that is contrary to the sacrosanct character of the religious compact between the believers and God. Therefore, one needs to examine whether Buddhism would similarly exercise an appropriate preventive effect on taking one’s own life.

UNIQUENESS IN JAPAN'S SUICIDE CASES

1. Nationwide suicide statistics in Japan

Given the statistics provided by the WHO, Japan is without doubt home to one of the highest suicide rates in the industrialised world, which has been raising both national and global concerns about Japan being the 'Nation of Suicide'. In an effort to analyse the main characteristics of suicide in Japan, this section begins by displaying the nationwide statistics. Reliable suicide data for Japan can be obtained from two governmental sources: Vital Statistics compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) and the other, Statistics of Suicides recorded by the National Police Agency (NPA). The numerical distinction in data between the two derives from the procedures related to their statistical strategies.⁹ Since the NPA has the more recent statistics, I have mainly relied on its data in the following figures.

The following four tables show the breakdown of the suicide statistics for Japan by different categories. Table 1 shows the suicide rate by gender per 100,000 inhabitants for the past five years for both sources comparatively. As mentioned above, the NPA has included more recent data up to the year 2012. In respect of the ratio of male-female suicide rate, males consistently outnumber females every year, which is common to the ratios in other countries, too. This gender gap presumably testifies to the more economically responsible role of males as compared to females. The breakdown in regard to age group is shown in Table 2. The age group 50-59 has the highest suicide rate every year, followed by similarly high rates in the age groups of 40-49 and of those over 60. According to the statistics in Table 3, suicides categorised by occupation groups,

Table 1: Japan's suicide rates by gender for 5 years per 100,000 inhabitants

Year	The NPA's report			The MHLW's report		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2008	36.7	14.4	25.3	35.1	13.5	24.0
2009	37.8	14.3	25.8	36.2	13.2	24.4
2010	35.9	14.4	24.9	34.2	13.2	23.4
2011	33.7	14.8	24.0	---	---	---
2012	31.1	13.1	21.8	---	---	---

Source: annual Statistics of Suicide, 2012 (The NPA), Annual Vital Statistics, 2012 (The MHLW)

Table 2: Suicide rates by age group for 5 years

Year	Age Group						Total
	0-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	over 60	
2008	2.6	23.3	26.1	30.7	36.0	31.7	25.3
2009	2.4	24.1	26.2	32.1	38.5	31.3	25.8
2010	2.4	23.3	25.1	30.6	36.3	30.3	24.7
2011	2.7	24.3	25.0	29.2	33.7	28.9	24.0
2012	2.6	22.5	21.9	26.1	29.9	26.9	21.8

Source: Annual statistics of Suicide, 2012 (The NPA)

Table 3: Suicide by occupation for 5 years

Year	Self/family employed	Company employed	Student	Jobless	Uncertain	Total
2008	3206	8997	972	18279	795	32,249
2009	3202	9195	945	18733	817	32,845
2010	2738	8568	938	18673	783	31,690
2011	2689	8207	1029	18074	652	30,651
2012	2299	7421	971	16651	516	27,858

Source: Annual statistics of Suicide 2012 (The NPA)

Table 4: Causes of suicides for 5 years

	family	health	economy/ life	work affairs	love	school	others	Uncertain
2008	3,912	15,153	7,404	2,412	1,115	387	1,538	8,759
	12.3%	47.5%	23.2%	7.6%	3.5%	1.2%	4.8%	
2009	4,117	15,867	8,377	2,528	1,121	364	1,613	8,411
	12.1%	46.7%	24.6%	7.4%	3.3%	1.1%	4.7%	
2010	4,497	15,802	7,438	2,590	1,103	371	1,533	8,118
	13.5%	47.4%	22.3%	7.8%	3.3%	1.1%	4.6%	
2011	4,547	14,621	6,406	2,689	1,138	429	1,621	8,070
	14.5%	46.5%	20.4%	8.5%	3.6%	1.4%	5.2%	
2012	4,089	13,629	6,219	2,472	1,035	417	1,535	7,243
	14.4%	48.0%	18.4%	8.7%	3.6%	1.5%	5.4%	

Source: Annual statistics of Suicide 2012 (The NPA)

the unemployed are consistently predominant in number followed by the company-employed in each five year period. Table 4 shows overall data of the causes of suicide reported from 2008 to 2012. Religious faith does not statistically comprise the main variable in regard to suicide. Rather, half of its causes are driven by health problems, with depression emerging as its main cause.

Based on these factual four tables, most suicides are committed by people who meet background conditions such as being male, middle-aged, either unemployed or company-employed, and with health problems. These tendencies also substantiate men's financial burden in society in accord with an extant patriarchal gender role (the male as primary breadwinner), especially against the background of the steady decline in Japan of the life-long employment system.

2. Uniqueness of suicides in modern Japanese society

New travellers to Tokyo, especially those travelling by rail, might at first be confused by the frequent delays of trains accompanied a dead-pan voice announcing 'due to a bodily accident the train service is temporarily being halted...'. Visitors soon learn the implicit meaning behind the announcement to be a suicide jump so that they grow accustomed to this euphemism for someone jumping in front of a train. It has proved to be a very reliable, though perhaps not the most popular, form of suicide in Japan, despite the fact that the perpetrator's family might be charged a high amount of compensation due to the disruption caused to the railway services. In addition to 'death by train', there are some other typical or unique methods that are worth mentioning in the current epidemic of suicides in Japan.

The advent of the internet has undoubtedly helped in this process especially in the form of the 'Suicide Website'. The object of the first media attention paid to the suicide website was possibly Dr. Kiriko in 1998. He was a 27-year-old man whose cartoon alter-ego went by the alias Dr. Kiriko, a practitioner of euthanasia. He was contacted by police after a woman had been found in a critical condition exhibiting traces of potassium cyanide that he had sold to her. After the woman's eventual death, Kiriko also committed suicide by self-poisoning. He had hosted a message board called "Dr.Kiriko's consulting room" to chat with web surfers about suicide, some of whom took orders for the poisonous drug from him. Though exactly how he was involved with his 'clients' remained a mystery until his sudden death, this case was said to have been the first to have raised awareness in Japan about how the internet was used as a means of assisting suicide.¹⁰

While some tens of thousands of websites indeed encourage teen victims of school bullying and struggling job seekers, even others have been provided with opportunities for a less lonely suicide or an 'internet

joint suicide' since 2002.¹¹ Perfect strangers meet like-minded people in suicide-related chat rooms or on websites and then make a 'suicide pact' to die together. The majority of the victims are young ranging from teenagers up to those in their 30s. Strangers with different motives for seeking an untimely death, meet in a particular place merely to spend their final hours together. In 2005, seven people died from the inhalation of carbon monoxide poisoning from charcoal stoves, having sealed themselves inside two vehicles. Police found four and three in each car respectively, including a 14-year-old girl. According to the suicide notes found inside the cars, all seven had made plans to die together in internet chat rooms. Likewise, at least 20 people died in 2004 and 55 in 2005 by group suicide through their having made the arrangements on the internet. Police estimate, however, that the actual figures may be far higher.¹²

Unlike the internet generation, the typical pattern of suicide among middle-aged men is more often courted by financial adversities. Their deaths, described as *inseki-jisatsu* (so-called 'responsibility-driven suicide') are imperceptibly intertwined with the Japanese sense of responsibility.¹³ The pressures due to their responsibilities towards their families have made them choose self-sacrifice in preference to their families having to face financial difficulties. For example, fathers, as the sole breadwinners, may take their lives to gain the insurance money for their surviving family members. Otherwise some of them may drive themselves to death in the hope of gaining enough money to cover unpaid loans or debts. In view of the countermeasure adopted by insurance firms to defer the exemption period a few more years, they will patiently wait until the lapse of this period to secure a payout.¹⁴

In regard to the particular mindset of the Japanese, a comment by Jose M. Bertolote from the WHO's Department of Mental Health brings to light the problems concerning suicide being committed out of a sense of failure and its alleged effect of atonement: "In Japan, suicide is likely to be part of culture. The immediate cause is due to overwork, joblessness, and bullies, and so forth. Suicide, however, is regarded there as an ethical standard to preserve one's honour and to take responsibility by suicide".¹⁵

This kind of viewpoint has been widely and repeatedly noted by Western observers as well. As he suggested, the price of failure in Japanese society is too high so that moral judgement permits no personal defensive excuse but rather promotes an indelible longer-term self-admission of guilt. Thus, the Japanese, required to function under such unendurable normative pressure, may therefore involuntarily tend towards

adopting a resolution to kill themselves to demonstrate their atonement rather than to live in disgrace. *The Economist* magazine offered an insightful solution to this Japanese inclination: “Suicide might be less common if, rather than force people to endure lifelong shame, Japanese society began to allow its people second chances”.¹⁶

THE JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY OF DEATH

1. Proverbs

In this section, I will analyse the religious influence on the Japanese Philosophy of Death as it might serve as a way to decode the background of the suicide issue in the Japanese cultural or religious context. The proverb ‘to die *Isagi-yoku*’ is one of admirable types of death to the Japanese, literally meaning “leaving no regrets”, “with a clear conscience”, “like a brave man”, “with no reluctance”, “in full possession of one’s mind”, and so on. It also refers to the metaphor of falling cherry blossoms representing transience and a brave death.¹⁷ The Japanese are reluctant to meet death lingeringly, but rather sacrifice their lives willingly at any worthy occasion. It is not a form of escapism according to the definition by Durkheim’. Cherry blossom viewing is undoubtedly one of the most popular spring traditions in Japan. The Japanese see virtue in the fact that flowers are blown away by the wind within a few weeks, rather than fade and die naturally, analogous to their ideal of transitory beauty.

2. Zen and Samurai -Mindfulness

The symbolism of a brave death expressed through the imagery of cherry blossoms was deeply embedded as an ideal attitude particularly among the military classes (*samurai*) in medieval Japan, which was profoundly influenced by Zen Buddhism. Zen was first brought to Japan in the thirteenth century, in the Kamakura period, when the Hojo military class had started governing.

Daisetsu T. Suzuki, a prominent Japanese Zen scholar, in his book *Zen and Japanese Culture*, points to the valuable contribution made by Zen Buddhism in the development of *Bushido*, ‘the way of the warrior’. Due to the Hojo family’s sincere encouragement, Zen was able to flourish and influence the feudal society morally and spiritually up to the eigh-

teenth century, but even thereafter it was seen to have permeated the whole of society and not only the upper classes.

Whereas Zen has never encouraged the samurai's violent profession in practical ways, it instead promoted mental balance in their daily lives. Suzuki highlights that "Zen has sustained them in two ways, morally and philosophically".¹⁸ First, from a philosophical perspective, Zen juxtaposed the virtue of using one's intuitive simple mind with that of using one's intellect and logic. Suzuki argues that although Zen may thus somewhat neglect the use of logic, it aims at attaining personal and experiential understanding instead: "There is something of the Zen method of training, which consists in personally experiencing the truth whatever this may be, and not appealing to intellectual or systemic theorisation".¹⁹ It could be concluded that Zen's emphasis on simplicity and directness is indispensable for the warrior spirit. Furthermore, the essence of Zen meditation is to achieve mindful concentration on only one single object, which is congenial to their fighting spirit as Suzuki explains:

To go straightforward in order to crush the enemy is all that is necessary for him. He is therefore not to be encumbered in any possible way, be it physical, emotional, or intellectual. Intellectual doubts, if they are at all cherished in the mind of the fighter, are great obstructions to his onward movement, while emotionality and physical possessions are the heaviest encumbrances he may have to suffer if he wants to behave himself most efficiently in his business.²⁰

3. Hagakure: readiness for death

The second spiritual contribution of Zen to the samurai spirit is the training code known as bushido associated with asceticism in swordfighting constituted by the development of unwavering readiness to sacrifice one's life at any moment. Therefore, it requires rigorous mental training of the kind offered by Zen emphasising that worldly affairs primarily constitute occasions for one's inner reflection.

A particularly good guideline is given by Tsunetomo Yamamoto's utterances, arranged and given the title *Hagakure*, literally meaning either "hidden by the leaves" or "in the shadow of leaves". Yamamoto was a samurai in the early 1700s and later became a Buddhist monk after

retirement, although he referred to no specific correlation between Buddhism and the samurai code.²¹ It is also valued as ‘the book of samurai’ appreciating that the samurai’s reflection on death is as deep as of that on life in the middle of the mundane world. Thus *Hagakure* consistently encourages detachment from life without cherishing any strong cravings and the consideration of life and death as equally valuable. In its opening sentence the book begins with its most popular phrase: “The Way of Samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death... This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai”.²²

The problem of death is one that everyone has and an even more pressing problem for the samurai engaged in battle. As he needed to maintain a cool head along with consistently excellent swordmanship, the samurais used Zen meditation to improve their mindfulness for this purpose.

4. The Suicide of Yukio Mishima

The ritual suicide of Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) is one of the most representative embodiments of the philosophy inspired by *Hagakure*. Mishima, the famed Japanese writer, was listed as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature three times. He is often compared with Jean Cocteau from France because of his prolific and versatile talents, not only in writing novels, poems, essays, and traditional Kabuki and Noh playwriting, but also in his activities as a sportsman and film actor. His last and most supremely monumental act was to commit *seppuku* (disembowelment) in adherence to the ritual way of the samurai by cutting open his stomach using only a ritual sword and arranging for a *kaishakunin* (a ceremonial beheader) to subsequently chop off his head.

To the samurai, *seppuku*, whether ordered by someone else or volitional, was in preference to the disgrace and shame of living as a war-loser or a captive. The act is an incontestable demonstration of their dignity, honour, and loyalty. Mishima ardently espoused bushido and had openly declared that “my only eternal book would be *Hagakure*”²³ in his Introduction to *Hagakure*. His own views on volitional death were very similar to those of Yamamoto:

“The problem of death overwhelms us, enduring for eternity unchangeably in either the time of *Hagakure* or in the present time. From such viewpoint, death as stated in

Hagakure is no special matter. Reflection on death every day is as meaningful as the reflection on life every day; it is what *Hagakure* alleges”.²⁴

Mishima also differentiated his notion of volitional death from simple suicide: “Voluntary death emerges from one’s own volition. The willing suicide does not represent defeat such as a suicide in western ways, but ‘the selectable act’ and ‘free action’”.²⁵ He also added that in this way, “we are able neither to choose our own moment of death, nor to be forced when to die”.²⁶ Although his death has yet been a matter of much debate in Japan, it is clear at least that both Yamamoto and Mishima had both challenged the idea that death needs to happen by itself and only be determined by the decree of destiny.

5. The Paradoxical Prescription of Suicide

This paradoxical contemplation on life and death still permeates modern Japanese society. The *Kanzen Jisatsu Manual* (The Complete Manual of Suicide) which was first published in 1993, has sold over one million copies. Phrased as “The only verbal suicide machine in Japan”, by Wataru Tsurumi, the author, the book is composed of an explicit compendium of ten suicide methods such as overdosing, hanging, jumping, gas poisoning, and so forth.²⁷

Tsurumi’s aim was to expose taboo questions in society, though neither explicitly encouraging nor discouraging suicide: “Why we must not kill ourselves, why we must continue living, and how to challenge life without being trapped by the never-ending daily grind?”,²⁸ albeit the manual has been blamed for the increasing numbers of young followers inspired by its guided methods. In Tokyo, in 1999, the book was found along with two young suicide victims. Yukiko Nishihara, the founder of a Tokyo helpline, is also baffled by the numbers of suicide ‘failures’ who call him in great pain, when they had wrongly followed the book’s instructions.²⁹ After repeated criticism by parents’ and suicide prevention groups, the Tokyo metropolitan government and some local authorities designated the manual as *yugaitosho* (a book harmful to youth), by virtue of which sales were restricted to people over 18 years old. Tsurumi complained that he was being made a scapegoat: “No one ever killed themselves just because of my book”.³⁰ In a newspaper interview, he also advised under-18-year-olds to read his book more because “They need it more than

anyone. It is important that people realise that suicide is not wrong. It is the right of every individual to kill themselves and, no matter what laws you enact, you cannot stop it.”³¹

The debate between respect for an individual’s rights and the actual restrictions on suicide needs to be further discussed because it seems that the lack of discrimination between life and death paradoxically might indeed lead to a lack of appreciation of the value of life. Tsurumi ends the book’s prologue by referring to one of his friends who carries a small capsule of a powerful drug called Angel Dust said to trigger the immediate desire to kill oneself. He thus lives light-heartedly without a fixed job, saying “I can take the drug and commit suicide whenever I need to”³² hoping his book would “serve like the capsule and relieve a bit of anxiety from the hearts of people who compulsively try so hard in life”.³³

6. Amor Fati and Voluntary Death

Maurice Pinguet, in his voluminous study *Voluntary Death in Japan*, refers to a number of suicides that are lucid and determined, or in his words, ‘voluntary deaths’ in which suicidal acts must not be judged on their outcome alone, but each must be understood separately. He seems thereby to have adopted the unique attitude in the Japanese tradition, to quote Nietzsche, of ‘*amor fati*’ (love of destiny): “Destiny must not only be endured, it must be loved and conquered, for that is the price of serenity – *amor fati*”.³⁴

If voluntary death is dedicated to superior faith or to elevated aims, the Japanese mindset would be inclined to approve of it charitably. Moreover, it is taken as noble altruism far removed from self-centeredness. This manner of the idealisation of martyrdom, however, may be seen to have engendered a society harbouring some fascist features. It has been misused for political aims in Japanese history. In World War II, for example, the notorious *Kamikaze* pilots, who were the young human bullets with only enough fuel for a one-way flight to crush the enemy’s warplanes while praising “Glory to the Emperor!”, are often blamed as forming part of the tradition of suicidal behaviour cited above. The pilots were allegedly all volunteers. However, one survivor disclosed the pathetic truth that they had been ordered to embrace obligatory death as a justification for the Japanese participation in a war not of their own making, by then Japanese government. Likewise, the defence of the pacific island of Iwo Jima was also regarded as a form of ‘voluntary death’, thus is also a

continuation of this Japanese tradition.³⁵

By 1868, the privileges of the samurai were abrogated and the Japanese had to endure a miserable defeat in World War II in 1945. ‘Death with honour being more admirable than life in disgrace’ – this misemployment of the philosophy of death should never again be repeated in our history. The inherent qualities of the samurai tradition, however, have not been completely destroyed. The Japanese still pay respect to their virtues of loyalty, devotion, discipline, and sacrifice. Once faced with unavoidable defeat, the Japanese do not hesitate to face death preferring to sacrifice themselves in conformity with the decrees of destiny without cowardice. Voluntary death is thus imperceptibly associated with intentionality.

CONCLUSION

It is a pity that those Japanese in social and economic difficulties continue to engage in religion-inspired voluntary death in order to find a solution to their problems. Excuses and self-defence are still considered shameful responses to the normal challenges posed by life. As their judgment of one another’s failures is often extremely severe, their societal and moral values may influence them decisively into a reckless decision to commit suicide.

Therefore, it would appear that certain traditional forms of a ‘noble death’ influenced by the normative and religious structure are still historically relevant. However, the prevalence of voluntary death and the rising concern posed by suicide in modern Japanese society must also be viewed separately. It is worrying that some modern Japanese take their own lives by wrongly interpreting the act of suicide as their predetermined right in the face of societal or economical hardship.

Likewise, the real enemies of suicide would appear to be hidden elsewhere in society unrelated, perhaps, to philosophy or aesthetics. The government, in this light, has, fortunately, adopted comprehensive measures to cope with the problem: in particular, it has adopted a specific goal to achieve the decline in the number of annual suicides by 20% from the 2005 level by 2016. This ratio is to correspond to about 25,000 suicides a year.³⁶ The government’s aim, however, will be difficult to implement without changing its perception of the true causal factors hidden within the mind-set of the Japanese. While not wholly or unanimously

tolerant of suicide, they may still be intolerant of the shame of having been seen to have behaved irresponsibly by society because the Japanese are very vulnerable to a sense of responsibility and dignity. Unwilling to proclaim their faults because making excuses for failure is a shameful act, by the same token, guilt and self-punishment are greeted with much sympathy and admiration. If volitional death is regarded as the only way of redemption for errors and faults, then nothing would be esteemed so highly as the act of killing oneself.

In this respect, it would appear that it would benefit society not to be overly critical. As long as the majority of suicides are attributed to societal or economic problems, society's severe eyes being cast on people's failures is bound to have repercussions. Japanese normative values, in this light, continue to drive people to the verge of suicide, as they are not given any opportunities for constructively engaging with their failures. This causal influence could then act to force them to make a reckless decision on the spur of the moment, accepting as their destiny or fate that they are thereby at least 'saving face while not admitting their faults'.

Endnotes

¹This paper is based on an oral presentation held at the Research Seminar of the Guna Chakra Research Center, the Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion at Assumption University, Bangkok, on the 29th January 2014. This presentation was made in the context of the MA program in Buddhist studies at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and the MA thesis written by the present author entitled *Buddhism and Suicide: 'The Ambiguity of Karmic Fate and Voluntary Death: Suicide Cases in Theravada Buddhism and Japanese Society'*.

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³The full text of my dissertation is available in the library of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ayutthaya, Thailand.

⁴Bertolote, Jose Manoel and Alexandra Fleishmann, "A Global Perspective in the Epidemiology of *Suicide*", *Suicidologi*, arg.7. nr.2, (International Association for Suicide Prevention, 2002), p. 6.

⁵Varnik, Peeter, "Suicide in the World", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 760-771; doi:10.3390/ijerph9030760, 2012, p. 760.

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²⁵Ibid, p. 42.

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